Ensuring National Security through Island Territories: Islands as Unsinkable Aircraft Carriers

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Throughout history, Islands has been playing crucial role in determining the superpower in the globe. According to many geopoliticians, rising nations have controlled strategic islands to project power across vast areas of the globe.[1] In contemporary period, the British Empire has been the superpower due to its naval prowess and control of oceans through key islands. In fact, one of the key maritime strategists— Alfred Thayer Mahan, has propounded that "a nation which controls the pivot area of the Ocean dominates the globe". Hence, in order to control an ocean, islands are the key instruments.

India is naturally gifted by virtue of its geostrategic location— it occupies a central position in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) by flanking Arabian Sea in the West and Bay of Bengal in the East and the Indian ocean in the South. India's maritime boundary stretches with a coastline extending more than 7,500 Km, which entails almost more than 1,200 Islands under its territorial sovereignty. Its peninsular feature provides a natural strategic reach across wide maritime spaces in all directions, further extended by the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI) and Lakshadweep & Minicoy (LMC) Island groups.[2]

India considers the Indian Ocean as its backwater. However, the IOR contests many traditional and non-traditional security threats & challenges especially , the Sino – Indian rivalry, which has turned the IOR into 'a powerhouse of maritime rivalry'. The expanding Chinese presence in IOR through various agreements and 'debt trap diplomacy' for its dream project that is the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), poses serious concern to the national security of India, US, and other resident powers in the region. In order to address these challenges, small Islands that are strategically located in the IOR will be a game changer. Island territories in particular facilitate greater maritime presence, help generate a common picture for maritime domain awareness (MDA) and allow new strategic collaborations.[3] Islands are "fixed" geographic features that are capable of changing the security and defence policy of a nation. However, their importance in maritime strategy has been underappreciated and underutilised in recent time.

This paper briefly focuses on the geographical and strategical significance of Islands for a Nation's National Security. In a broad purview, the paper elaborates some of the strategic islands and their vital importance in the Indian Ocean Theatre. It enumerates the role of these islands in the nation's national security through an island strategy—how they contribute to maritime power? how islands in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) can be utilised to ensure national security of the nation? The paper entails a new Island Strategy and some policy recommendations for India's strategic community.

Strategic Significance of Islands

"If a steel ring can be created around India with air and naval bases at suitable points and if within this area so ringed, a navy can be created strong enough to defend its home waters, then the waters vital to India's security can be protected and converted into an area of safety. With the islands of the Bay of Bengal, with Singapore, Mauritius, and Socotra, properly equipped and protected and with a navy strong enough in its home waters, security can return to that part of the Indian Ocean which is of supreme importance to India".

—K M Panikkar[4]

Islands are of strategic significance not only from a national security point of view but also economically, politically, and culturally. Darshana Baruah, a maritime researcher notes that *"… rising nations have [sought to control] strategic islands to project power across … the globe. "* [5] India's most 'influential exponent of geostrategic thinking'—K M Panikkar in his book *India and Indian Ocean: An Essay on the Influence of Sea Power on Indian History*, stressed the importance of India's naval power to its emerging positions. He firmly believed that island territories in the IOR, would act as coordinating mechanisms for land naval and air capabilities. In fact, noting the importance of forward bases, he strongly asserted that India should create 'a steel ring of naval bases' in Singapore, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Socotra and other ocean littorals.[6]

Islands and their territories are significant for 'maritime power projection'. During the Cold War period, the island territories of Western Indian Ocean sub theatre became 'the Centre of Gravity' for US power projection[7]— the Diego Garcia naval facility continues to enjoy an important position i in US maritime strategy. The French gave independence to Comoros, but retained the La Reunion Islands due to its strategic significance. Likewise, Russia during the Cold War period focused heavily on Seychelles.[8]

In fact, Geoffrey Till— the maritime strategist, believed that islands envisage lots of significance to ensure a nation's security. He emphasised that, islands are used for surveillance and for intelligence gathering through surveillance posts, providing logistical support for naval vessels engaging in operations from deep-sea and against mainland targets; preventing enemy attacks from hostile ships or foreign intrusions by acting as fortification; refuelling combat aircrafts and safeguarding naval assets, weapon systems & munitions.[9]

There are numerous benefits and opportunities associated with islands their its associated waters. In terms of economy, Islands are enhancers of the blue economy, they serve the needs of energy security. Some of the major strategic significances of islands and island territories are as follows:

- **_Indicators of Sovereignty._** The islands and island territories are important 'indicators of territorial sovereignty' of a nation. The nations which are blessed naturally with strategic Islands, islets and rocks enjoys extended Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which came into force in 1982, allows a nation's government to establish exclusive economic zones extending beyond their territorial waters, within which they retain certain sovereign and jurisdictional rights under part V of the convention. The EEZ can extend up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline— this makes the water to be utilised for achieving maritime security objectives. This helps the naval forces in securing both its local maritime operations and deep sea operations.

- **_Marine Resources._** Islands are great locations for setting fishing bases and other elements of maritime economy. These strategically located islands are home to vast array of untapped marine resources. In fact, some of the islands are geo-strategically located in the areas wherein there are abundant oiland gas reserves available. For instance, the disputed Senkaku islands which is claimed by China, Japan and Taiwan is considered to be 'a powerhouse of energy resources'. The Indian Ocean is considered as a 'treasure of opportunities', which remains untapped in fields, maritime connectivity and renewable energy. Marine resources which entails minerals such as oil and gas, deep-sea mining (exploration of rare earth metals), and hydrocarbons. Islands also serve as important support facilities to maintain oil rigs.

- **_Operational Enablers._** Islands are considered as strategic operational enablers of a nation's maritime strategy. They can be converted into military bases to project power and facilitate control of waters. One of the best example for this can be traced

back to the World War II period, when US used the 'Island Hopping Strategy' propounded by McArthur**.**

- *Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).* One of the major requirement, indeed a prerequisite, of naval force for an effective maritime strategy is the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). It is an all-encompassing concept in which the navy is being cognisant about all the actors in the maritime domain.[10] The International Maritime Organization (IMO) defines MDA as "the effective understanding of any activity associated with maritime environment that could impact upon the security, safety, economy or environment". [11] Islands are key elements in maritime domain awareness; they enable the navy to orient itself with the dynamic maritime environment. Islands also facilitates in enhancing coordination between all maritime stakeholders.

- *Military Muscle Flexing.* Islands are also effective when it comes to maritime muscle flexing by the armed forces. It facilitates greater response to the adversaries by conducting a series of amphibious operations in the Islands.

- *Forward Defence.* Islands could be used as forward operational bases to facilitate the navy to reach and ensure its naval presence in the deep oceans and the international waters. Operational Turn Round (OTR) facility in island territories increases the range of naval forces[12]. For instance, recently the USAF deployed B-52H Stratofortress strategic bombers in the airbase located in Diego Garcia.[13] Due to the significant characters and geological features, islands in the IOR will contour the new framework for security architecture. Easy access and control over strategic islands will provide strategic advantage of forward presence and will eventually lead to superior maritime power projection.

Encircling Strategic Islands in the Indian Ocean Region

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean, dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the Twenty – First century, the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters".

—Alfred Thayer Mahan[14]

The IOR is one of the third largest ocean in the world after; it alone constitutes 20% of the ocean water surface on earth. The IOR in broader terms is referred to as the Indo-Pacific Region and is a centre of geopolitics. Alfred Thayer Mahan in his book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, propounded that IOR is a pivot and a nation which dominates the IOR through its maritime power or naval supremacy will be the world superpower and will dominate the world.

The IOR is considered as a key area of international security and as an epicentre of global trade, with over 80% of the world's seaborne trade in oil, and around 100,000 commercial vessels traversing the Indian Ocean per year.

The Indian Ocean arena, in terms of geography, can be broadly classified into three areas vis. the Western Indian Ocean, the Central Indian Ocean and the Eastern Indian Ocean. It stretches from the North of East Africa to India-China in the West, from Indian sub-continent in the North to Antarctic in the South. IOR is of immense significance due to various reasons—mainly due to its geostrategic location, IOR holds 16.8% of the world's oil reserves and 27.9% of natural gas reserves. It is a major conduit for international trade and commerce. IOR is home to more than 2.5 billion people in the bordering areas and in ocean littorals. Major chokepoints of the world such as the Malacca Strait, the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Aden, Bab-el-Mandeb, Palk Strait, Lombok and Sunda are strategically located in the region. Major ports such as Chabahar, Mumbai, Hambantota and important international shipping lanes (ISLs) are all located in the Indian Ocean.[15]

The IOR comprises many islands however, there are a series of strategic islands which are most widely discussed—,Sri Lanka, Diego Garcia, Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Madagascar, Comoros, Assumption Island, Mayotte Island, La Reunion Island, Agalega Islands, Cocos (Keeling) Island, Christmas Island, Sabang Island and other small islands and islets. These Islands and their territories span the ocean from Africa to Southeast Asia. Islands in the Indian Ocean are located along key sea lines of communications (SLOCs) thus providing access and influence over important chokepoints and waterways, and thus, their key geographies have the potential to impact geopolitical competition.[16]

Their strategic importance is highlighted by their location along key SLOCs. These islands are vital to, and can facilitate a navy's continuous presence along key international shipping routes, allowing a navy to patrol and secure SLOCs during peace times and an option to interdict and cut off an adversary's communications during times of conflict. Such presence allows navies to project power and increase their profile as net security provider. While operations from and near these four islands provide good coverage of the south and central Indian Ocean, there are other islands which are equally important but poorly examined. [17]

Such presence allows navies to project power, increasing their profile as a net security provider. While operations from and near these four islands provide good coverage of the south and central Indian Ocean, there are other islands which are equally important but poorly examined. India is geo-strategically blessed with two strategic island territories —the

Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal and Lakshadweep & Minicoy Islands in the Arabian Sea. Thus, it provides India to enjoy certain benefits— *one*, to create Exclusive Economic Zone. *Second*, by virtue of its geostrategic location, it naturally facilitates forward presence in Indian Ocean.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI)

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI), strategically situated in the South-eastern part of Bay of Bengal, are set of two archipelagos of 572 islands and islets. The islands envisage a lot of strategic significance for India's maritime security. For instance, the island dominates the SLOCs along with the Ten and Six-degree channels, which connects the strategic chokepoint that is the Straits of Malacca. Currently, the island also serves as the sitting of tri-services command of the Indian Armed Forces— the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) headquartered in Port Blair.

In 2012, the then Chief of Naval Staff (CNS)— Nirmal Verma, made a clear statement on the importance of ANI, by stating that "the geographic disposition of the archipelago … offers a vital geo-strategic advantage to India, for they provide the nation with a commanding presence in the Bay of Bengal". [18] In addition, the island territories of ANI are considered as a Gateway for connecting India with Southeast Asian Nations and these islands could provide India with unparalleled advantages as Beijing expands its presence in the Indian Ocean.

Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands (LMC)

The Lakshadweep and Minicoy Islands is an archipelago of about 36 Islands which are strategically located in the East Coast of India. It spreads over 32 km and provides almost 400,000 sq.km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to India.[19] Viewing from a security perspective, the islands are of great significance, when it comes to securing the western Indian Ocean and the Indian Mainland especially from transnational terrorism.

The LMC islands are more significant due to their proximity to Eight Degree Channel—one of the busiest SLOCs through which major sensitive vessels passes. The channel divides the Minicoy islands from the Maldives.

The Indian Navy has a dedicated operational naval base— INS Dweeprakshak based in Kavaratti with the support of three naval detachments (NAVDETS) located at Kavaratti, Androth and Minicoy. Additionally, the Indian Coast Guards also has a district headquarter based at Kavaratti.[20]

Diego Garcia

Diego Garcia is the biggest island of the Chagos archipelago located in the central Indian Ocean. The island is a part of British Indian Ocean Territory which was later acquired by US from Britain. The US Military continues to operate from t Diego Garcia. . Professor Kent E Calder argues firmly that "Diego Garcia is one of the most strategically important bases on earth".

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an immediate maritime neighbour of India. The island nation is home to a considerable amount of Indian Tamils and shares some cultural linkages with South India. The major feature of the island littoral is its close proximity to India and its strategic location in the Indian Ocean. The Hambantota Port is an important port situated in the Indian Ocean arena and facilitates trade across the region. However, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port soon fell under the Chinese control, who aims to create a 'String of Pearls' strategy— encircling India through accessing ports in the IOR, primary aim of which is to bring down New Delhi's influence in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, Sri Lanka serves as a classic example of China's 'Debt Trap Diplomacy' that is to acquire ports and islands located in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Maldives

Maldives is a small island state located in the Indian Ocean. The archipelago consists of almost 1,200 islands, out of which most are uninhabited. Viewing from a maritime perspective, these islands facilitate a good watch over the SLOCs. India believes that it is its responsibility to provide security to this small island state. This is very much evident from the success of 'Operation Cactus' carried out in 1988 wherein the coup de tat in Maldives was neutralised by India's Tri-Service and the Para Special Forces.. Since then, diplomatic ties between India and Maldives have been growing.

Socotra

The Island of Socotra sits at the mouth of the Gulf of Aden just past the Bab el-Mandeb—a critical chokepoint between the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. Any disruption in the waterways of the Bab el-Mandeb would result in blockage of the Suez Canal, thus interrupting all traffic between Europe and Asia. Socotra provides an ideal position to monitor traffic in and out of the Gulf and the Horn of Africa.

Vanilla Islands

Vanilla Islands is an island group of six small island nations namely, Comoros, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mayotte, Réunion and Seychelles; they are termed as "Vanilla" due to the huge export of Vanilla from these islands. Since ages, these and other islands such as Socotra have been strategic areas facilitating the flow of goods and supporting migration of people across the Indian Ocean.

During the colonial era, these islands gained military significance, when efforts were initiated by European powers to influence the SLOCs in IOR. In fact, some of these island territories were considered as areas of paramount importance for American power projection in the Western Indian Ocean Theatre during the Cold War period. In the 21st century, these island territories are viewed as linchpins for power projection and are key areas of rivalry between India and China.

- *Comoros.* Comoros Island is a significant part of the African archipelago, which connects the Western IOR with Africa. Comoros comprises of three major islands vis.Grande Comore (Ngazidja), Anjouan (Nzwani) and Moheli (Mwali). It is located near the northern mouth of the Mozambique Channel and to its west, Madagascar is located. The island is near the Strait of Hormuz— one of the important busiest shipping lane in the IOR. Due to its key location, the island nation focuses on enhancing its maritime capabilities and blue economy potential. Hence, apart from collaborating with France— a traditional power in the region, the island has been keenly looking at Asia especially towards India and China to build its maritime capabilities. However, at present, China has made several engagements with Comoros and tries to maximise its strategic collaboration.[21]

- *Madagascar.* The Island nation of Madagascar is the fourth largest island in the world, situated in the Western Indian ocean. Its close proximity to the eastern coast of Africa and shared borders with the Mozambique Channel, made it one of the key sea lane, before the operationalisation of the Suez Canal. The Mozambique Channel still remains strategically significant due to its mineral resources, especially natural gas. Madagascar is considered as a major focal point in China's African Strategy. India maintains a cordial relation with Madagascar. India has had maritime links with Madagascar for several centuries. Settlements of Indian merchants in Madagascar dates back to the late eighteenth century". [22] Due to the growing strategic importance of Western Indian Ocean, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) recently included Madagascar and Comoros into its IOR division.[23]

- *Mauritius.* Mauritius is well known to the world due to its 'critical location' rather than its natural resources. Hence, it is often referred to as the 'Pearl of the Indian ocean Region'. It is located in the Western Indian Ocean. The island has been best viewed by both New Delhi and Beijing as a key area of influence in the Western Indian Ocean as well as to enhance their relations with the African Union.

- *Mayotte.* Mayotte Island is an integral part of French Overseas territories and it is inhabited by French citizens. The island is salient due to its geographicl location. It is accompanied by two other islands namely La Réunion and Scattered Island. Viewing from the military perspective, the island is considered as of strategic significance by Indian strategic thinkers. In fact, the Indian Navy had conducted joint naval exercise— Varuna with their French counterpart near the island. The Mayotte island still remains as a place wherein the Navies of India and France can orient themselves with interoperability and information sharing.[24]

- *La Réunion.* La Réunion is a French Territory and lies to the southwest of Mauritius. The French Navy maintains a strong presence in the Western Indian Ocean and the Eastern Coast of Africa through this base. France also patrols and deploys to the Mozambique Channel from La Réunion, maintaining a presence in the exclusive economic zone around several French islands situated in the channel.

- *Seychelles.* Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands; it is regarded as an important destination by major powers in the IOR. Due to its geostrategic location, it becomes a vital for countering maritime terrorism and piracy. Seychelles is of vital geopolitical importance and China is fighting to get an upper hand. India must not allow this.[25]

  o **Assumption Island.** The Assumption Island is a part of Seychelles archipelago, geo-strategically located near the North of Madagascar. Due to its importance, India approached Seychelles and signed a project agreement on construction of a military facility in the island, which was agreed to be jointly used by the Indian Navy and the Seychelles Navy.

- *The Cocos (Keeling) Islands.* The Cocos (Keeling) Islands, an Australian external territory, is an archipelago located in strategic waters, south of Sumatra. The Indonesian Straits of Sunda, Lombok, and Ombai can serve as alternative routes to the Indian Ocean especially for military vessels. These straits will become important as China continues to explore ways to send their sub-surface vessels to the Indian

Ocean 'undetected'. The strategic value of these islands is closely related to their ability to monitor the Indonesian as well as the Malacca Straits.

Role of Islands in India's National Security Strategy

National Security is one of the critical prerequisite for a nation to secure its national interests and achieve the national aim through comprehensive national power. The Joint Doctrine of Indian Armed Forces (JDIAF) defines the term National Security as "the protection, preservation and promotion of our National Interests against internal and external threats and challenges. [26]

India's security is an integral component of its development process. National Security and the underpinning strategies have both National and International dimensions. National Security not only focuses on military security but also influences energy, food, health, education, politico – diplomatic structure, water, economy, technology, cyber, space, nuclear deterrence and environment.[27]

India's National Security Strategy (NSS) is intended to provide guidance to nation's leadership as also to the security apparatus to deal effectively with India's threat's and challenges, both externally and internally, while empowering it to achieve its legitimate aspirations in Asia and the world. The NSS is also responsible for preserving and promoting the nation's democratic polity, development process, internal stability and unity in its unique multi - cultural settings. The NSS comprises various strategies concerning related to land, air and maritime domain.

India's Maritime Security Strategy

India's Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) is a set of five constituent strategies aimed at achieving its maritime security objectives. The strategy is of immense significance for maintaining a peaceful and stable environment in the IOR and among other littoral states. The strategy, as a whole, focuses on ensuring India's maritime security and countering Chinese presence in IOR.

The Island and their territories can be utilised by the Navy to carry out operations and actions such as EEZ Surveillance and Patrols, Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT), Anti-Piracy Operations, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Operations,On-combatant Evacuation Operations, Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO), Peace Support Operations (PSO) and Maritime Search and Rescue (M-SAR).

Each one of these strategies uses a sequence of various doctrinal roles played by the Indian Navy (IN) vis. military, diplomatic, constabulary and benign, through their associated objectives, missions and tasks. The various constituents of the strategy describes the range of coordinated and synergised efforts, to maintain and strengthen India's maritime security. The constituent strategies mainly focus on deterrence, conflict, shaping a favourable &positive maritime environment, coastal & offshore Security, maritime force and capability development.

Table 1: Role of Islands in India's Maritime Strategy[28]

Strategy For	Role of Strategic Islands
Deterrence	• A ship based missile system or protected silos in the islands. • Induction of an autonomous fleet with submarine facility. • Serves as alternative to aircraft carriers.
Conflict	• Naval fleet with special operation support elements in the islands will enhance the mobility. Enables the forward presence of the navy during maritime operations.
Shaping a favourable and Positive Maritime Environment	• Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) Operations. • Carrying out bilateral and multilateral exercises. • Allowing the navies to visit the islands as part of LEMOA, OSSP, etc.
Coastal and Offshore Security	Coordinated patrols and SAR operations with friendly naval force in the Andaman Sea will help to monitor shipments crossing the SLOCs.
Maritime Force and Capability Development	• Peace Support Operations (PSO) and Maritime Search & Rescue (M-SAR) Operations. • Positioning of Intelligence posts and CSN. • Enables air power at sea by establishing airfields.

A New Island Strategy for India

At present, New Delhi needs a new island strategy— precise and a robust, effective strategy, aimed at ensuring maritime security in its local waters and forwarding its presence in the Indo- Pacific Region through the island territories in its waters as well as in the ocean littorals.

11

To be more elaborate on the main object of this strategy, India should achieve the following:

- Ensure the nation's national security by achieving maritime security (offshore security) and coastal security.
- Increase its sphere of influence (power projection) in the Indo-Pacific region.
- Thwart the increasing presence and activities of the Dragon (China).
- Make the ocean littorals feel the notion and spirit of India as 'Net Security Provider' in the IOR.
- Maintain good order at sea by neutralising non – traditional security threats.
- Facilitate India in becoming a world super power.

What is the Strategy All About?

The Strategy can be viewed from two broad parts vis. the 'Chain' and the 'Ring', *first*, by utilising the islands and its territories within the sovereignty of India i.e. Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI), Lakshadweep & Minicoy Islands (LMC) and *secondly*, by accessing other strategic islands in the IOR.

Under the first part of the Island Strategy, the strategic community should mainly focus on the following:

- Upgrading / developing existing level of infrastructure especially the security infrastructures in both ANI as well as in LMC.
- Protect and preserve the infrastructures in the islands and utilise them effectively and efficiently.
- Transform the islands into a 'naval sentinel' with the establishment of autonomous fleet and expeditionary force capability to champion the emanating security threats and challenges in the ocean.

Part I "Chain" of Island Strategy

Andaman and Nicobar Islands

- The Narcondam Island – part of Andaman archipelago, should be efficiently used to counter the Dragon's presence in Myanmar's Coco Island. The island can be utilised as an Intelligence Post by setting up radar stations, surveillance & intelligence equipments such as sonars, early warning systems, etc. This will facilitate severe monitoring of the Chinese activities not

only on the Coco Island but also in tracking submarines and anomalies in underwater area and in SLOCs. Under the Maritime Zones of India (MZI) Act of 1976, surveillance posts can be set up in the islands to ensure the security of India's EEZs.[29]

- The small islands can be transformed into Smart Islands by fixing ocean floor acoustic sensors and other surveillance systems to detect and monitor the increasing movements of Chinese and other submarines.

- Major non-traditional security threats along the shores of South India — illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing poaching of sea cucumbers, drug trafficking, smuggling of gold, tendu leaves and turmeric from Tamil Nadu, fuels from Andhra Pradesh and textiles from West Bengal, can also be addressed through these Islands. In addition to this, illegal migration from South India to Sri Lanka and vice versa can also be averted".[30]

- The ANI and the LMC islands should have deployment of special forces elements of the armed forces such as the Para Special Forces of Indian Army, MARCOS (Marine Commandos) of Indian Navy and Garuda Commandos of the Indian Air force, for speed and agile operations aimed at neutralising the non-traditional threats of maritime terrorism, piracy, and robbery at sea.

Air Power at sea is a critical requirement.

- With the help of ocean littorals / maritime neighbours, India should create an island chain by connecting LMC islands, Diego Garcia, Maldives, Mauritius's Agalege islands, Seychelles and La Reunion islands. This can also be linked with India's 'Necklace of Diamonds Strategy'. This Island Chain will strengthen India's maritime foothold and will pave way for quick and agile response to the threats or challenges. Additionally, it will also help the Indian Navy in ensuring security and peace in IOR by interdicting illicit transfer of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)— their delivery systems, and related materials and by escorting sensitive cargos and vessels under the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI).[31] Already, the Indian Navy regularly patrols the Strait of Hormuz and the mouth of Strait of Malacca.[32]

Lakshadweep and Minicoy (LMC) Islands

- A tri-services command in this island chain should be created by connecting ANI with LMC, which will enhance the island's coastal security and 'offshore security' in the region. Eventually, it will lead to reduction in piracy and other maritime terrorism

activities such as drug trafficking, smuggling of red sandalwoods, fuels & cigarettes off Gujarat and Maharashtra.

- In January 2020, the Indian Air Force (IAF) upgraded its Thanjavur air base (AFS Thanjavur) by inducting 222 squadron 'Tigersharks' comprising of six advanced Su-30 MKI Indian fighter aircrafts with supersonic Brahmos cruise missiles, ready for deep-sea operations and maritime missions into the Indian Ocean.[33] Likewise, deploying IAF fighter aircrafts in Lakshadweep Islands (Kavaratti), will provide more manoeuvrability and quick response to distress calls from the maritime theatre. In addition, it will be a strong warning signal to the Chinese Navy in IOR.

- The non-traditional security threats could be neutralised and eradicated by deploying naval units in small islands (smart islands).[34]

- In August 2013, India launched its first indigenous military communication satellite —Rukhmini**.** It was considered by the Indian Navy as a force multiplier. It covers our entire footprint of the area of interest in the Indian Ocean. Using Islands as satellite network bases brings an entirely new dimension in network and maritime operations.

Part II "Steel Ring" of Island Strategy

- India should take control of the strategic Islands in the Western Indian Ocean and and the South-Eastern Indian Ocean by deploying its military as well as balancing its 'diplomatic' soft power through the instrument of persuasion with regard to micro island states in the Indian Ocean and key littoral states around the Indian Ocean Rim and extended neighbourhood.

- As rightly mentioned in India's new Indian Ocean Policy, *Security and Growth for All in the Region* (SAGAR) is equally important in the contemporary world.— SAGAR is an initiative of India to enhance its security cooperation and economic ties with the ocean littorals and island states in the IOR. SAGAR focuses on enhancing security cooperation and will ultimately pave the way for accessing the military facilities of the strategic islands in its maritime neighbourhood. In addition, it will facilitate India's need for peace and security in the IOR as also India's vision of a " free, open, inclusive Indo-Pacific region" as articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the Shangri La Dialogue on 01 June 2018.[35]

- To gain overseas strategic support points (OSSP), logistics support and operational turnaround (OTR) in the east, the Malacca Strait and South China Sea will connect India to the Pacific and to most of its major partners — ASEAN, Japan, Republic of Korea, China, America and the Pacific countries.

- India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' should focus on actively engaging in security measures by identifying nations with common interests and secure access to Islands.

- Creation of an Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFR-IOR) in New Delhi, to monitor and track the activities in SLOCs of Indian Ocean maritime domain, is welcomed by most of the Island nations. In future, islands should also be linked with IFR-IOR.[36]

Policy Recommendations

After analysing the importance of Islands and their nexus with India's maritime strategy, some policy recommendations for the strategic community are enlisted here:

- Islands can be utilised for quick and dispersed Operational Turn Round (OTR) capability and for improved operational logistics and replenishment capability at sea through the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) between the island nations.

- India needs to urgently chart a roadmap toward the sustainable development of Islands, in particular, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands through the Islands Development Agency.[37]

- India should seek out collaborations, not just for strategic reasons, but also to bolster the development of "smart islands" — a concept that looks to develop a sustainable model for islands catered towards generating islands' economies and protecting their unique biodiversity.[38]

- A sister island concept between the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and La Réunion could be the beginning of an effort to realise a sustainable development model for strategic islands.

- India aims to upgrade facilities on the Agaléga Islands of Mauritius. In 2015, India and Mauritius had signed a MoU to improve air and sea facilities at the Agaléga Island.[39]

- Efforts should be initiated to boost connectivity amongst the islands in Western Indian Ocean in terms of both sea and air connectivity. Various cruises offer stops at multiple destinations within the Vanilla Islands, offering tourists an opportunity to travel to these beautiful, remote islands. There is great potential for luxury and eco-tourism opportunities not only for the Vanilla Islands, but also for islands across the IOR. These initiatives contribute to the island's economy and self-sufficiency. In terms of energy, the island continues to invest in its clean energy initiatives under the

Paris Agreement. La Réunion has its own challenges, but overall it offers a great model for India's efforts in building smart islands.

- Delhi has initiated an initiative to sustainably develop islands and make them self-sufficient under its "smart-islands" programme.[40] India and Japan plans to jointly work for developing smart islands through a promising strategy to identify technological, infrastructural & developmental strategies and management processes, that would facilitate the development of smart islands in an efficient and effective manner.

- India continues to deploy its P-8i aircrafts to Seychelles and neighbouring islands; it must sign a similar agreement with Madagascar and Comoros to help patrol and monitor the waters around the island's significant Exclusive Economic Zone. India must position its Coastal Surveillance Networks (CSN) in these islands, which will indeed help the Indian Navy in maritime domain awareness and strengthen its collaborations with the forces of island nation. In addition, India should appoint a defence attaché in any one of the strategic islands in the Mozambique channel in order to orient the security developments or dynamics in the region.[41]

- The Information Management and Analysis Centre (IMAC) of India is responsible for monitoring, surveillance and tracking of events and activities that takes place in the Indian Ocean maritime domain though CSN connected to NC3I (National Command Control Communication Intelligence). Under this CSN, strategic islands should be brought under the network by positioning surveillance equipments such as Electro-Optic sensors equipped with Charge Coupled Device (CCD) day and night camera, Frequency Diversity Radar, Long-Range Thermal Imagers, Automatic Identification System, a distress alert transmission system and meteorological sensors.[42] These Islands can be used to collect information and can act as early warning systems during operations at the time of crisis. As part of the consecrated effort to 'militarising' Islands, in 2006, India positioned its radar surveillance monitoring station in northern part of Madagascar.

- Training facilities for the Indian Coast Guards (ICG), Coastal Police and Indian Navy divers should be created in the small islands. It should also be installed with underwater diving facilities.[43]

- In February 2020, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS)— General Bipin Rawat in an interaction with the media stated that, an Indian Ocean centred Peninsular Command could be formed by end 2021.[44]

- Additionally, India should enhance and develop the security infrastructures of islands mainly through 'Make in India Defence' initiative.[45] This initiative should entail vessels such as Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) Corvettes, Water Jet Fast Attack Crafts (WJFAC), Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs). Especially, in Integrated Anti-Submarine

Warfare (ASW), Coastal Surveillance System (CSS), Light Weight Torpedoes and etc.

- India's current security infrastructure at ANI is limited and has been severely affected due to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. As part of strengthening the security infrastructure, India came up with a plan to extend the runways at Naval Air Stations— INS Kohassa (Shibpur) and INS Baaz (near Campbell Bay). The geostrategic and geopolitical competitions in the IOR region is inevitable. However, with proper infrastructural development, force upgradation and joint operations force, ANI is likely to become a pivot for India's maritime power projection and in the future as a naval sentinel in the IOR.[46]

- Seychelles's 'Assumption Island' located in the Aldabra group of Islands, is vital and a strategic asset for India, for enhancing its potential of Blue Water Navy. Access to this Island must be ensured through security cooperation policies and India's 'Island Diplomacy'.

- At present, the eastern fleet based in Vishakhapatnam is responsible for operation near the Malacca Straits, and thus its access to the Pacific Islands is limited.[47] Hence, in order to enhance India's maritime presence and ensure a strong foothold in the Pacific Islands, India should gain access to strategic Islands in the pacific region and increase its naval presence in the regions. In fact, India already has access to the 'Sabang port in Sabang Island of Indonesia', and 'Changi Naval Base in Singapore'.

- India's should approach the Pacific Island Countries (PIC) through the Forum for India – Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC), a multilateral platform comprising 14 Pacific Island nations — Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. This forum was initiated in 2014 by India.

- India should gain access to the strategic islands through its diaspora residing in the these islands. India have its resident missions located in two nations— Fiji and Papua New Guinea. Hence, it can utilise and streamline the population there through the NRIs residing in those Islands.

- Defence Minister of India— A K Antony in 2011 stated that, India is 'mandated to be a net security provider to island nations in the Indian Ocean Region'.[48] These island states were seen by India as vulnerable to piracy, marine terrorism, Islamist jihadist terrorism, and unwelcomed Chinese attention.

- The Indian Navy should be credited as 'a tool for humanitarian assistance'. It has been the first responder to any distress calls from the ocean littorals. Piracy concerns resulted in signing of a defence agreement in 2009 wherein India set up radar

stations on various Maldivian atolls with an aim of parolling the island's EEZ. Recently, India sent its Navy to address an oil spill incident in Mauritius and Sri Lanka.

- India's project 'Mausam'— a Ministry of Culture project to be implemented by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi as the nodal coordinating agency with support of the Archaeological Survey of India and National Museum as associate bodies".[49] Project Mausam will allow India to strengthen its ties with Island nations through cultural and heritage link. Indeed, it's one of the best soft power which India can use in accessing the Islands.

- India currently possesses two operational aircraft carriers vis. INS Vikramaditya, INS Vikrant and another planned carrier—INS Vishal. INS Vikramaditya is a 45,000 tonne repaired 'Admiral Gorshkov' from Russia. It was deployed in in November 2013, and INS Vikrant, a 37,500 tonne of military might, is in sea trials. Both these aircraft carriers are basically "ski-jump" carriers. The Indian navy considers aircraft carriers as game changers and as enablers of superior power projection in the maritime domain. In order to address the needs of the Navy, INS Vishal, 65,000 tonne *military might is being constructed in the naval dockyard. However, to maintain airpower at sea, these strategic islands should be utilised as 'unsinkable aircraft carriers' in order to ensure air power at sea.*

Conclusion

The distinction between war & peace and between state & non-state actors is increasingly blurring, and especially in the maritime context, increased synergy between all maritime security agencies is a *sine qua non* for effective maritime security.[50]

As rightly mentioned by the CDS, synergised effort is needed in order to maintain a good order at sea. Considering the current situation and the paramount importance of islands and island territories, the strategic calculation of the nation and Delhi's attention on IOR should focus more on infrastructural development and militarisation of islands under the sovereign territory of India, as well as to gain access to the strategic islands of the maritime neighbours. India needs to develop and transform both— the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (ANI) and the Lakshadweep & Minicoy islands (LMC) into a 'naval sentinel' by upgrading military establishments that is by equipping them with support of expeditionary force. This will further enhance India's presence in IOR, and facilitate the achieving of India's national interest that is of being a regional power and become the 'net security provider' of the reqion.

Secondly, the critical need for an aircraft carrier cannot be completely replaced but as of now can be addressed with the help of the islands in the IOR. Strategic Islands can thwart China's presence in the IOR and create a paradigm shift in India's maritime power projection. Moreover, security provided by these island territories, will allow New Delhi to focus on security concerns, primarily non-traditional in nature, prioritised by island nations in the Indo-Pacific.

As rightly quoted by K M Panikkar, "India's security was fundamentally bound by those who were controlling this strategic oceanic realm, from the Gulf of Aden on the west to the South China Sea in the east".[51] While viewing through the vision of Mahan, India, by dominating its own islands as well as other islands of the littorals in the IOR, will dominate the Indian Ocean arena. India should be in a position to leverage its geographical location . Islands are the key to dominate oceans— by controlling strategic islands any power, irrespective of being rising or a major power, can dominate the entire ocean region and benefit militarily, economically and politically. These Islands should be intelligently used as launching pads and can be great substitute for aircraft carriers.

From national security perspective, the basic idea or notion behind this Island strategy is— "Whoever controls strategic islands and island territories, controls the Indian Ocean Theatre. These islands are the key to dominate the Indian Ocean. Whoever controls Indian Ocean Theatre dominates and decides the destinies of the World".

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